

Rwandan rebels tramp towards capital, government flees

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KIGALI, April 12 (Reuter) - Rwandan rebels singing war songs advanced through northern Rwanda's misty hills on Tuesday towards Kigali, the blood-drenched capital from which a rump government fled in panic.

Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) spokesman Wilson Rutayisire said rebel radio would start broadcasting messages to Kigali residents when the rebels entered the city.

"We will tell them to take care and stay away from the fighting areas. They should either stay indoors or move out of the city," Rutayisire told Reuters.

He said that 2,400 rebels had surrounded the city and that the operation to enter the centre itself had started.

"Most of the forces are still on the outskirts," Rutayisire said.

Fierce fighting took place throughout the day. Residents woke to the sound of mortars and heavy artillery booming around the steep hills of the lush city in the heart of Africa.

Army helicopters hovered low over the city and fired a salvo of at least five missiles at suspected rebel positions.

Witnesses said Rwanda's entire cabinet, appointed last week after the death of President Juvenal Habyarimana and rejected by the rebels, fled to Gitarama, 40 km (25 miles) southwest of Kigali.

Habyarimana's death last Wednesday in a rocket attack on his plane sparked the current bout of centuries-old bloodletting between Hutus and the minority Tutsi.

A receptionist at the city-centre Hotel des Diplomates, where the government was based, said all its members piled into a convoy, with a heavy escort of soldiers, and drove out of the city to the southwest.

A lone soldier stood outside the Hotel des Diplomates, previously guarded by hundreds.

"I don't think the hotel will be functioning later today," said one diplomat.

Western military sources said RPF fighters, racing to reinforce a 600-strong contingent stranded in Kigali under a shattered peace agreement, were now only a few km (miles) away.

Captain Ronny Verneers, in charge of 80 Belgian paratroopers protecting the French School evacuation centre, told Reuters fighting was taking place nearby.

“We just had a lot of firing with mortars and light weapons from this hill,” he said pointing at a hill some 2,000 metres (yards) away.

“The army hasn’t a hope in hell,” replied a French military commander when asked if the army could hold back the rebels.

Jubilant rebels swigged from bottles of beer and danced as the U.S. singer Tracy Chapman’s hit “Talking about the Revolution” blared out over rebel radio.

“Their spirits are high, everyone is drinking,” said Reuters reporter Aidan Hartley. “They are celebrating the imminent end of long years of exile.”

Representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) laid sandbags around their headquarters in the city centre and taped up windows to prevent injuries by flying glass.

The last few Westerners in the city scrambled to safety, many weeping for Rwandan friends and even relatives left behind.

“How would you feel if you were leaving your wife and you didn’t know where she was?” sobbed a middle-aged Italian man, cradling his Rwandese-Italian child.

Westerners fleeing the tribal bloodbath have abandoned friends and even relatives to near-certain death.

“We are leaving behind a lot of partners, and a lot of friends and a lot of them are already dead,” said Frank West, a Swiss diplomat.

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